

HEAD LICE (PEDICULOSIS)

Head lice are small grayish insects about the size of a sesame seed. They live only on the human scalp and hair. They feed on blood. Although they don't transmit disease, their feeding habits usually irritate the scalp causing head rash and itching. (It can take 2 - 3 weeks before the itching is first noticed.) Scratching the scalp to relieve itching can result in a secondary bacterial infection.

Head lice attach their eggs at the base of a hair shaft. These eggs, or nits, appear as small, whitish flecks. They are especially noticeable on the back of the neck and around the ears where they are firmly attached to the hair shafts. Head lice can readily be differentiated from dandruff because they are very difficult to dislodge from the hair shaft.

How Are They Spread?

Head lice cannot fly, hop or jump. They are spread primarily through direct head to head contact, although sharing personal items such as hats, brushes, combs, and linens may play a role in their spread between children. They also have been spread by shared athletic gear such as baseball helmets and bicycle head gear. Anyone can catch head lice. They occur where people live, learn, work or play together.

A child with head lice is usually required to be excluded from school, day care etc. until they have been treated for head lice. Check with the facility for their exclusion and return policies.

Treatment

Treatment for head lice begins with shampooing a child's hair with products designed to kill the lice and the nits. Regular shampoo doesn't help. Neither do shampoos medicated to treat dandruff or other skin problems. Contact your health care provider for recommended shampoo.

Usually recommended are over-the-counter lice pediculicide shampoos that are available without prescription. The active ingredient in most of these products is the insecticide permethrin, although other synthetic pyrethrins may also be used. These products are relatively nontoxic in humans. Other shampoos contain lindane as the active ingredient. Lindane is more controversial since this insecticide has been reported to be toxic to humans, especially babies and pregnant women. However, according to the Food and Drug Administration, products that contain 1% lindane are safe and effective when used according to the product label. Lindane-containing shampoos are only available by prescription. **Use the shampoo according to the label instructions.**

Pediculicides kill most but not necessarily all the nits, so the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and recommend a follow-up shampoo treatment seven to 10 days after the first treatment.

Shampooing is followed by combing the hair using a very fine toothed comb designed to remove nits from hair strands. First dunking the comb in a solution of white vinegar helps loosen nits.

Prevention

Although head lice are not able to survive off of humans for more than a few days, the following precautions are recommended if a family member has head lice:

- Wash infested family member's clothes (including hats and scarves) and bedding in very hot water.
- Vacuum carpets and upholstered furniture in rooms used by infested person.
- Soak infected family member's combs and hair brushes in hot (65°C) water for at least one hour.
- Seal in plastic bags and place outdoors on a porch or a deck or in a garage for 2 weeks all articles that cannot be washed in hot water and hot air dried. Examples are stuffed animals.

- Discourage children from sharing hats, scarves, combs.
- Do not share sports helmets.

Flea bombs and other environmental insecticides are not effective against head lice.

REFERENCES

Health Information, National Center for Infectious Diseases, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Department of Health and Human Services

HEAD LICE (PEDICULOSIS)



**NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Public Health Program
1849 "C" St., NW (Room 7427)
Washington, D.C. 20240
202-565-1120
Fax 202-565-1115**

February, 1998

If you have any questions, please contact your Regional Public Health Consultant or park sanitarian, or call WASO Public Health for more information at **202-565-1120** or see our NPS Public Health web page at www.nps.gov/public_health/.

